Confusing word choices?

By Stacey Herman, staff writer
Office of Communications

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Business communications has never been more complicated - Cell phones, video conferencing, e-mails, web content, correspondence, reports and presentations cause even the greatest writer or orator to stir with apprehension that their message is clearly understood. Each month this column will explore the many different ways each of us can learn to communicate more plainly.)

The English language is notoriously complicated---all those punctuation rules, parts of speech, clauses and confusing word choices. Here's a refresher course on proper word choices for some of the most common culprits we encounter every day in business writing. Next month I will review more confusing words---- as to not confuse you with too many confusing words in one article!

Accept: Means "to receive."
I am happy to accept this award.
Except: Means "to make an exception."
I will make all the food except for dessert.

Advice: Used as a noun.
I would like to offer you some advice.
Advise: Used as a verb.
I advised him of his legal rights.

Affect: Used as a verb and means "to influence."
The advocates affected the outcome of the debate.
Effect: When used as a noun it means "result." When used as a verb it means "to cause or accomplish."
The effect of the policy change will be lower employee turnover.

All ready: Means "everyone is prepared."
Are the kids all ready to go on vacation?
Already: Means "by now."
Is it time to leave already?

All ways: Means "all methods."
We communicated with staff in all ways.
Always: Means "constantly."
The faucet is always dripping.

Among: Refers to being surrounded by three or more things.
The big island is located among three smaller islands.
Between: Refers to a relationship comparing two things.
The conversation was just between Eric and Sarah.

Assure: Means "to remove uncertainty." Used with people.
He assured us that they arrived safely.
Ensure: Means "to guarantee an outcome." Used with events.
Please ensure the program starts on time.
Insure: Means "to provide insurance" Objects and lives are insured.
Morgan insured her house in case of fire.

Because: Refers to a cause and effect relationship.
I slipped on the steps because of ice.
Due to: Used as an adjectival prepositional phrase.
Due to weather related circumstances, the party is canceled.

That: Introduces a vital clause and is not set off by commas.
We went to the reunion that was held on Friday night.
Which: Introduces a non-vital clause and is set off by commas.
We went to the reunion, which was held on a sunny afternoon.

Over: Refers to a spatial relationship.
The cereal is stored over the refrigerator.
More than: Usually refers to an amount.
There were more than 100 people at the farmer's market.